

Our Nation's Veterans Deserve Better

Congressman Michael McCaul

On July 4th, America marks the 238th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the birth of our nation. Since that historic July 4th day, and before it at Bunker Hill, Lexington, Concord, and Boston, American soldiers have fought to protect our rights as well as the freedom and liberty not just of Americans, but of nations and people across the globe.

My father, James Addington McCaul was one of these soldiers. He flew 32 bombing missions as the Bombardier on a B-17 during World War II. He served America proudly, and was a part of the largest bombing campaign in American history in support of the D-Day invasion at Normandy. He is my hero and had he needed the care and support of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), I would have hoped that he would have been treated with the respect and dignity he earned and deserved.

Based on recent reports that VA employees were falsifying records at medical centers across the country, including Texas, in order to conceal the amount of time veterans had to wait for an appointment with their doctor and an audit showing more than 57,000 veterans have been waiting for up to three months for medical appointments, I'm not so sure he would have.

At home in my district, my staff and I have been fighting this type of indifference and malpractice since I first took office in 2005.

A constituent of mine who, who agreed to share her story, has been forced to deal with an unresponsive and at times hostile VA. Her husband, who served in Vietnam, was exposed to Agent Orange and in 2005 was diagnosed with cancer. What followed over the next seven years before his passing in 2012 was a battle with a government agency that instead of helping only made things more difficult?

Their tragic story includes refusal of care at a VA hospital because the VA "didn't have space", unreturned phone calls from VA, and a Veteran not getting the treatment he deserved. At one point, one of the Veteran's doctors called the VA to discuss transferring him to a VA facility and all the Department could say was "Don't call us, we'll call you." That call never came.

After her husband's death, my constituent's fight carried on. She had to jump through hoops and fight the VA to receive burial and survivor benefits and to get her husband's hospital bills paid. Finally in May after nine years of fighting this battle by herself, she called my office. My staff is now working tirelessly to help her.

It is clear to me that the Department of Veterans Affairs is broken. This is simply unacceptable and must be corrected immediately.

In response to the scandal, I have requested both VA Inspector General and FBI criminal investigations, both of which are now underway. The House also passed commonsense legislation that I sponsored, the VA Accountability Act, which allows VA to fire or demote senior executive employees at the VA for no other reason than poor performance or neglect. Across our country in small and big business alike, people know, Do your job, or you'll lose it. Unfortunately the bureaucracy in Washington functions differently.

Here in Texas Governor Rick Perry has enlisted the help of local health care providers willing to see veteran patients outside of the backlogged VA medical network. I commend him for being proactive on behalf of Texas' 1.7 million veterans. Similar legislation that would allow veterans to seek care outside of the VA system if they cannot schedule an appointment with a VA doctor in a timely manner, or if they live far away from the nearest VA health facility, is working its way through Congress. Allowing Veterans to seek care outside of the VA network would help eliminate the backlog and offer a more convenient alternative care option for our veterans.

At the entrance of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Washington, DC, the VA has engraved its motto, which quotes President Abraham Lincoln, into the side of its building: "to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan." Unfortunately in recent years it appears that many who work at VA have forgotten what that means. I hope that with the right reforms and new leadership, the VA, and our nation, can move away from scandal and once again focus on caring for America's heroes.

###